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ABSTRACT

This document describes an experiential workshop which focuses on the application of key communication strategies to alleviate relationship problems between older parents and their adult children. Three communication devices are outlined which can make possible an exchange of ideas and opinions and promote an increased understanding between parent and adult child. The communication devices described are: (1) leveraged listening; (2) the total message; and (3) requests made with tactful assertion. Verbal invitations, rephrasing, and verifying are presented as three methods of demonstrating leveraged listening. It is noted that workshop participants are given the opportunity to learn and practice strategies reported to be effective in the areas of interfamilial relations by reducing conflicts in the family of the older adult. Following a description of the communication strategies, four scenes are given for role playing which demonstrate the application of leveraged listening, the total message, and tactful assertion to four sensitive situations which may occur frequently in the family of the older adult. For each of the four scenes, dialogues are provided which illustrate ineffective and effective communication. (Author/NB)

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Communication Strategies between Older Parents and their Adult Children

ABSTRACT: THIS EXPERIENTIAL PRESENTATION FOCUSED ON THE APPLICATION OF KEY COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO THE ALLEVIATION OF RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS BETWEEN OLDER PARENTS AND ADULT CHILDREN. PARTICIPANTS HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN AND PRACTICE STRATEGIES REPORTED EFFECTIVE IN THE AREA OF INTERFAMILIAL RELATIONS. AN EXAMPLE OF A PRIME STRATEGY WAS THE USE OF ASSERTIVE TACT IN MAKING A REQUEST. THE USE OF THESE STRATEGIES WAS REPORTED AS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN THE REDUCTION OF CONFLICT IN THE FAMILY OF THE OLDER ADULT.

Welcome to our workshop.

A few words about the purpose and format of our workshop. It is based on our on-going class for older adults which began four years ago at Emeritus College, a branch of Santa Monica College. The class is designed to help participants (primarily older parents) make use of key communication tools which can significantly reduce friction between older parents and their adult children. We are not problem solvers. Not all problems have solutions. Not all problems in a family can be solved. Not all need to be solved. But parents and children need to be able to talk about them.

This is a relatively new area: the restructuring of known communication skills and their direct application to some common trouble spots. We began the class as an answer to the pleas from our students, "How do I talk to my children? How can I get them to listen to me?" We believe that we have a few answers.

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The students have a chance to practice skills many times before they make use of them in their family situations. In a strongly supportive setting, students role play with us in dyads, and in large and small groups. Although we teach several devices which have been shown to have positive effect, in our limited time today, we will present only three of these, Leveraged Listening and the Total Message as the foundation of Tactful Assertion in making requests. Then we will try to illustrate their usefulness by role playing four scenes.

We don't have the answers to, "What do I say in problem situations?" But we can help with the, "How do I open the subject effectively and with comprehension?" otherwise known as, "How can we begin to talk to each other?"

The most common conflicts between older parents and adult children, as reported to us, revolve around the differences arising from attempts to fulfill their needs. For example, parents felt the need to be included in the child's life, to have some impact there. They wanted to be respected for their experiences and they wanted to be able to ask for help, but to still feel in charge of their own lives. Their children also

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voiced a need for independence and autonomy, and wanted to be able to ask for help. They also wanted to have influence on the parent's life. The needs appear similar, but fulfilling the needs and coping with the resultant feelings often brought the two generations into conflict, and a communication breakdown.

In a presentation at the American Society on Aging meeting in March 1986 on Mother-Daughter relations in later life, Dr. Andrew Scharlach pointed out that most negative aspects of these relations from the Daughter's point of view dealt with Mother's complaining, with the mother's negativity, and her apparent insensitivity to the Daughter's needs.

From the Mother's point of view, the most negative aspect was the conflict between a desire not to be a burden and the deep need for closeness and friendliness. The mother does not know how to express this, so, she asks for the daughter to be involved in many chores and tasks when what she really wants is emotional expression.

The biggest stumbling blocks between mothers and daughters, according to this study, are these unmet needs and unrealistic expectiations, because neither can communicate them. So, mother winds up complaining a lot, gets overly involved in daughter's life, and asks her to do many chores. Daughter, who may well want to help fulfill some of mother's needs, can not understand them, or she feels mother's attitude about them is unreasonable. No matter how much she does, daughter may still feel burdened and often guilty.

Dr. Scharlach felt that using good communication was a key ingredient in helping each to understand the other's needs and to adjust their unrealistic expectations of each other in an effort to strengthen the relationship.

The communication devices we will outline did not solve the problems of our students. They did make possible an exchange of ideas and opinions, however long or short, that sometimes did resolve problems, but even more, brought an increased understanding of one another.

The devices themselves are:

Leveraged Listening, by use of verbal invitation, rephrasing, and verifying, **Total Messages,** and Requests made with Tactful Assertion.

Why the word "leveraged?" Because the use of overt, demonstratable listening behavior acts as a lever to open up the dialogue between parent and child. It enables each person to hear the other, and to convey some degree of understanding to the other person. By Leveraged Listening, you can evidence concentration on the other and, fully as important, you can facilitate the other's listening to you. A lever is a tool. Leveraged Listening is a tool that enables you to learn something from the other's words and makes the other more receptive to your words.

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How do you demonstrate Leveraged Listening? Three techniques we will demonstrate today are, the use of Verbal Invitations, Rephrasing, and verifying.

What are these?

Verbal Invitations are just that. You indicate that you're listening by briefly, at intervals, inviting the other to continue, to explain, to answer a quetion, to hurry up, to slow down, to cut it short. Using a neutral or upbeat voice, you have a choice of words, phrases, questions, and sounds to demonstrate that you are listening. For example, "Go on." "You were saying?" "And then,....?" "Really?" "uh huh." Or, you can ask clarifying questions, such as, "What happended then?" "What else did you say?" "When do you want to do that?" We urge students to keep it short. They may not really be fascinated by the answers but remember, they're using a listening device with a distinct purpose.

The second strategy in Leveraged Listening is Rephrasing. If older parents want to be reasonably sure they have "Got it," they can briefly rephrase one or two important points to the other person, and verify whether or not they've caught the meaning the other person wants to convey. Maybe your daughter or son wasn't clear; maybe your mind was wandering, or you were so distracted by your feelings you did not take in what was said. Rather than defend yourself or attack the other, use of Rephrasing determines if what you think he or she said was really what was said before you go out on a limb with your comments. You use your own words but you give the other a chance to review it. That is verifying. Did they actually say what you thought you heard? If there's a difference of opinion, there had better be a reasonable agreement on the words before a discussion of opinions and meanings.

Rephrasing and Verifying use lead-ins such as, "Let me understand...(Rephrase the speaker's words here.) "Did you say...(Rephrase.) "What I think you said was...(Rephrase.)" "In other words....(Rephrase.)" And the verifying words: "Right?" "Am I right?" "Is that it?" Keep flexible. If the other says, "That's not it!" Rephrase again. It is better to demonstrate that you want to understand even if it slows down the communication. If you do not Verify then you can speed along the wrong path, with you defending the path.

The Total Message: Now you have demonstrated your Leveraged Listening by Vebal Invitations, Rephrasing, and Verifying. The next skill allows you to express what you have to say, effectively and concretely, while verifying if the other person was listening. It's called the Total Message and it has four parts: (The parts may come in any order.) Some may be omitted; the more you use, the stronger the message.

1. What you actually saw or heard. Be a reporter, i.e., "I heard you slam the door."

2. What you thought about it. Be an editor, i.e., "I think you were angry over something." Quickly Verify here, "Were you?"

3. What your feelings were about it. "I feel....(whatever.) when I think you are angry."

4. And end by making a request. It can be anything from "Was that clear?" to a direct request, "Please don not slam the door." Then you Verify if the the other person agrees or disagrees, if they will comply with your request or not. That way your message has a closure. It doesn't drop into a well.

There are many ways in which you can make a request. The use of the Total Message is the foundation of Tactful Assertion. We employ Tactful Assertion for the request expressed in a firm, diplomatic manner.

The first component of making a request is audience analysis. Is your intended audience receptive? A few moments invested in checking the verbal v.s. non-verbal clues can help you determine if this is the right time for a particular question. Timing is essential in request making. Do you feel positive about requests made of you when you're tired, hungry, rushed, worried? Those moods can make anyone a poor audience.

If you believe you have a receptive audience, now you make use of the components of the Total Message. It is not a magic method, or one to use to 'psych yourself up' v.s. the fear of rejection. It is a specific tool with a determined purpose: the building of increased confidence which comes when you know you are learning something new for your own development.

Requests made with Tactful Assertion may incorporate all the parts of a Total Message; what you perceive, think, and feel. The request ends with you asking for something and then determining its reception. Remember, you can use any or all the components preceding the request. Just how many may depend on the importance of the request. "Would you like some coffee?" doesn't really require much preparation. But the more important the request, the more important it is to include as many of the components as you can.

Don't forget to keep your request short and specific. You may not get it. There are no guarantees, but, it is much more likely to be heard if it is specific rather than vague, concise rather than rambling. And, one request at a time, please.

Let's try an example. "M" will be the mother and "D" will be the daughter.

M: I see you're tapping your fingers (perception). It makes me uncomfortable (feeling), because I think you're in a hurry (thought). I'd like you to stay a while longer. Could you? (Request and verifying.)

D: Mother, you always say that.

M: I know it sounds that way (aligns herself with the daughter and doesn't combat). I do enjoy these visits (feeling). How would it be if we agreed on a time limit for the visits so you could fit them in more comfortably?

Mother makes the request because the visits may well be more important for her than for the daughter. The daughter may accept, refuse, stall or distract, but, making use of Tactful Assertion may avoid a hostile confrontation.

M: I'd like to talk about our visits now if you have a minute. Can we?

Done in this manner, the request is not a vehicle for judgement or blame. It is a simple, but complete statement about what would help. Still no guarantees, but, a relationship can change, accommodate and grow when both people can clearly express what they need.

Those are the strategies. Now, what are some of the situations in which they have been shown to help?

The four scenes we have chosen for role playing demonstrate the application of Leveraged Listening, the Total Message, and Tactful Assertion to four "touchy" situations which may occur frequently in the family of the older adult. Our students have reported such situations many times. Remember, we are not trying to solve problems. We are trying to set the stage for open discussion and the exchange of differing views in a relatively non-combative atmosphere. It is the prologue of the play.

The first few moments of each scene will probably be most familiar to you. The opening lines will emphasize what not to do. That opening may seem more natural, and it is. Familiar but inefficient patterns of communication come automatically in a tense situation. The replay of the scene demonstrates the conscious, deliberate use of the communication strategies we have presented, and yes, it does take practice.

The following four scenes aare typical of the role playing that may occur during a class session with older adults. During this workshop, if there is time, we would like to role play problem situations with the audienice.

(SCENES AT TEN MINUTES EACH)

Scene I: Both parent and child need to express their feelings of anger and frustration, but are suppressing them because of past history.

Most effective communication device:
The Total Message, applied to the avoidance itself.

In these scenes "M" is the mother and "D" is the daughter. Mother thinks daughter should spend more time with her. Mother is avoiding her feelings. Daughter drops in and...

D: Hi, mom. How are you?

M: (Sarcastic voice) Oh! You finally got here.

D: Don't start that again, mom. (Pause) You look upset.

M: I'm not upset!

D: (Ignore previous comment.) I thought, since I had the time today, we could go shopping for those shoes you need.

M: (Sarcastically.) I don't want to take up so much of your time.

D: You're always doing things like that to me.

M: What did I do?

Nar: An on and on... Now a replay of the scene using Leveraged Listening and the Total Message.

D: Hi, mom. How are you?

M: (Sad voice) I'm okay, I guess.

D: I thought that since I had the time today, we could go shopping for those shoes you need.

M: Why today?

D: I have the time today and you said you wanted those shoes.

M: (With irritation.) So, you have the time and I'm supposed to go along with your schedule? Is that right?

D: I didn't say that, and you sound mad.

M: I feel mad. I want...(daughter interrupts.)

D: (Irritated.) Why do we have to go into all that?

M: I think it's important. I would like to talk about it. What do you think?

D: (Hesitatingly) Well, I don't know. We always have trouble.

M: I would like to try it. Okay?

Narr: The stage is set for them to talk.

Notice how mother used a short Verbal Invitation. (A clarifying question.) "Why today?" She then rephrases, "So you have the time and I'm supposed to go along with your schedule?" and she Verified, "Is that right?" It wasn't too great a beginning but it enabled her to go into three parts of the Total Message. "I <u>think</u> it's important (thought). I would like to talk about it (feeling and a request). "What do you think?" (verifying.)

Scene II: This scene will deal with a mother's need to feel she still has an important role in the decision making of her daughter and the daughter's need to make her own decisions based on her own values.

Applicable devices: Leveraged Lisening, Verbal Invitations, Rephrasing and Verifying.

In this scene daughter comes to see mother.

D: Bill and I have been discussing a move to Chicago. There's a chance for a great promotion for him. I know this could be hard on you.

M: (startled) When?

D: In six weeks.

M: But, but, this is so sudden. You never said anything. Chicago, it's so far. (Tone hardens) You're always dropping things on me like this.

D: We really should move and take advantage of this opportunity. It will be such a good chance....

M: You didn't even <u>hear</u> me, did you?

D: I can't understand why you're so upset. You've always wanted Bill to make a decent living and now he has the chance.

M: But you never said...You don't even care what happens to me. How can you <u>do</u> this to me?

Narrator: And so on and so on. Now a replay with <u>Leveraged Listening and Verifying.</u>

D: Bill and I have been discussing a move to Chicago. There's a chance for a great promotion for him. I know this could be hard on you.

M: This is so sudden. What are you saying?

D: That Bill and I have been talking about moving to Chicago. There's a promotion in it for him.

M: I'm really surprised. You never mentioned it before.

D: I delayed telling you because I knew you'd take it hard.

M: You were afraid to tell me bacause you knew I'd feel bad. Is that right?

D: Yeah. That's about it. Mom, I'm not happy at telling you this way.

M: I'm really upset (pause). I'd like to talk about it (pause). Can we?

D: Okay, sure.

Narrator: Closure, The prologue has begun. It may make a very interesting play and all of you may be writing your own final act.

Mother led with a Verbal Invitation, "What are you saying?" Shocked as she was, maybe she could not believe her ears. Remember, a neutral tone or it becomes an acusation, an attack. She then brought in her feelings. "I'm really surprised." Telling daughter, "You never mentioned it before."

She rephrased what daughter said, and Verified to be sure it was what she had understood it to be. "You were afraid to tell me because you knew I'd feel bad. It that right?" Then ended her part of the prologue with the Total Message, making use of three parts: Thoughts, feelings, and request, and verifying it. "I'm really upset! I'd like to talk about it. Can we?"

Scene III: Both mother and daughter have the same need. The parent here needs to maintain her self esteem by feeling in charge of her own decisions, and the adult child needs to "take care of" these decisions by urging the "right" decision as the one proposed by the child.

Communication devices most effective: Leveraged Listening, Rephrasing, The Total Message and Verifying.

In this scene, the child wants the parent to move to a safer environment. The child presents that solution to the parent.

D: Mom, we've talked about this so many times before and yet you won't really deal with it. You know what happend down the street yesterday. You can't go on living in this neighborhood. It's dangerous.

M: I've told you before, I don't want to move. You always think you know what is right for me!

D: But it's so dangerous! I don't want you hurt. You've got to move.

M: Don't tell me what to do. I could tell you a few things about what you should do too.

Narr: And on and on... Let's replay this scene using Leveraged Listening and the Total Message.

D: Mom, we've talked about this so many times before. You know what happended down the street yesterday. You can't go on living in this neighborhood. It's dangerous.

M: You sound so freightened about me living here. Are you?

D: Yes, I am. The neighborhood is changing.

M: So, you think I can't take care of myself?

D: Mom, it's not that. I don't think living here is safe for you, alone, at your age.

M: I'm not really alone. I have friends here. I've always lived here. Can you understand that?

D: We can't go on worrying about you like this.

M: I think I understand what you're saying. You're worried about me and that's why you weant me to move. But, do you understand what I'm feeling?

D: I think so. (Uncertainly).

M: I appreciate your worry, but I think you're making too much of the danger. I feel good in my old neighborhood with my friends. If we discuss it, can you try to understand how I feel?

D: All right.

Again, the stage is set. The real dialogue can begin.

Mother, to indicate heer understanding and get herself on solid ground rephrased and verified, "You sound so frightened about me living here. Are you?" Note that, without verification by daughter, it could become a put-down, sarcasm or hostility. Mother then makes use of Verbal Invitation, a question for more clarification of where daughter is at. "So, you think I can't take care of myself?" She rephrases, "You're worried about me. That's why you want me to move." and later she Verifies, "Can you understand that?"

To be sure she is being heard and understood, she ends with the Total Message; thoughts, feelings, request and verification. "I appreciate your worry (feeling). I feel good in my old neighborhood (feeling). I think you're...(thoughts). "If we dicuss it, can you try to understand how I feel?" (A request that's twofold; one, to invite to discuss and, two, to verify comprehension of her feelings by her daughter.

Scene IV: In this final scene Mother needs daughter's help in building confidence. But does she know how to ask for it?

Mother is a widow. Aunt Elsie, mother's sister-in-law has, just announced a sudden visit. Mother and daughter are in mother's apartment.

First, how not to.

M: Dear, would you mind (hesitantly, voice trailing.) I know you're so busy with your classes, but, your Aunt Elsie is coming from New York next week...and...(voice fading)...She's so difficult.

D: You don't sound too happy about it. Don't you want her?

M: Oh, you know. All she needs is to see me dressed in something a few years old and everyone in the family will hear about it. And she's so picky.

D: So what? Everyone in the family knows what she's like.

M: I know, but...She was your dad's favorite sister. (Looks around helplessly.) Look at this place. it looks terrible. Things are so shabby. It's a disgrace.

D: Are you trying to impress Aunt Elsie? You didn't care when dad was alive.

M: You just don't understand. (Pause as if a thought hits her. The next words rush out.) Look dear, there's a big sale tomorrow at the May Co. If you would take me, I could at least get a new dress and if the chairs aren't too expensive...(stops)...What's that look on your face? Don't you want to help me?

D: Of course I do, but tomorrow? Why didn't you ask me sooner? I have to be at the library all day tomorrow.

M: I ask for one tiny thing so I won't be humiliated in front of your Aunt Elsie...So she won't look down on me, and you...

D: (Yelling) Mother, stop trying to pressure me!

M: (Yelling louder) I'm not. You don't even care.

Narrator: Bettere fade out at this point. Now we'll replay the scene using Leveraged Listening, and the components of the Total Message. This is Tactful Assertion to make a specific request.

M: I just found out that your Aunt Elsie's coming for a visit next week.

D: You don't sound too happy about it. Don't you want her?

M: I'm not. I always felt that she looked down on me. But she was your father's favortie sister. I just wish I weren't so...so afraid...that she'll think all my things are out of style and that my apartment looks shabby.

D: Oh, mother. That didn't bother you before dad died.

M: It didn't then. I know that I'd feel better if I looked better, maybe a new dress, maybe even a new chair for the living room. I wouldn't be so nervous about her visit. Do you understand my feelings?

D: I guess so, but...

M: I'm sure it will help me. There is a big sale at the May Co. tomorrow. Would you take me?

D: I can't. I'm too busy. I'll be at the library all day. Why not ask your friends?

M: I realize that you're busy and I did ask my friends. They're busy too. Right now a new dress seems so important to me. Can you appreciate what I mean?

D: Well, I guess I can. I'll tell you what. I'll think about it and if I can do it, I'll call you later.

M: I can see and hear that you're not crazy about my asking you. I'm getting desparate. Let's talk about it now. Okay?

D: Well, just for a few minutes. I still don't know how...

Narr: Again, this is primarily a prologue. Where will it go? What will be decided is unknown at this point. But mother did use Leveraged Listeening. She responded directly to daughter's comments. Then, she used a Total Message to express her request; her perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Despite the obvious temptations, she avoided blaming or criticizing her daughter. She may not get the new dress or Aunt Elsie's approval; however, her persistent use of Tactful Assertion to make her request may add to the confidence she needs to deal with Aunt Elsie and her daughter.

As you can see, we don't have all the answers, and the devices don't come "naturally." All the students need practice and our older parents have demonstrated their willingness to learn these tools, to practice them, and to incorporate them into their relations with their children. We do know from our experience for the past four years that the use of these communication tools can help set up a dialogue between parent and child.

They may not like the opinions and feelings expressed in the dialogue, but they <u>are</u> talking to each other, <u>probably</u> listening to each other, and <u>perhaps</u> understanding each other. Certainly it would be great if the adult children were also in our class, and someday they may be. But this sets the stage. The play may not have a traditional happy ending, but, at least, the older actors feel more confidence in themselves and all feel more respect for their fellow actors.